

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

By 1975, California had the eleventh largest economy among nations of the world. Its biggest industry, agriculture, had been built on the backs of legal and illegal immigrants.

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granted United States citizenship to many thousands of Mexicans living in the American Southwest. Between 1850 and 1910, tens of thousands more Mexicans immigrated to the United States to work, particularly as miners, railroad builders, and field hands. The Immigration Act of 1917, which set strict quotas for most immigrant groups, waived requirements for Mexicans, in part because agricultural growers wanted the availability of inexpensive labor. In the late 1920s, California growers also imported 31,000 Filipino men in an attempt to further reduce labor costs. The Filipinos were prohibited from buying land or marrying Caucasian woman.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, thousands upon thousands of legal and illegal Mexicans were deported or pressured to leave the U.S. under the so-called Mexican Repatriation Movement. With the entry of the United States into World War II, however, the situation again changed dramatically. An extreme labor shortage occurred throughout the nation, especially in its agricultural fields. Consequently, the Mexican Farm Labor Program, often referred to as the Bracero Program, was instituted in 1942. Under the Bracero Program, an estimated 4.6 million Mexican nationals crossed the U.S. border as farmworkers. In some places, camps were established where workers were fed, clothed, and housed. In other places, laborers lived on the ranches and farms where they worked.

In the 1940s and 1950s, many farmworkers quit the Bracero Program after finding better jobs and living conditions in cities and towns. They were then considered illegal immigrants. Some of these workers found it easy and convenient to bring their families to the U.S., immediately providing better living conditions for them as well. *Jesusita* begins in October, 1945.

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JESUSITA AND her four children are working and living on a ranch fourteen miles south of Fresno. The ranch is no different than the one they left four days before. There is nothing one can see anywhere except rows and rows of vines and the sky and an iron white sun above them. Twisted brown stalks rise four feet from the ground sending leafy vines with clusters of grapes in every direction. The grapes bow the vines so that they hang down around the stalks creating hut-like spaces. The rows are separated by six-foot paths on white, chalky, sandy soil that becomes blistering hot as the day progresses. Big wooden trays covered with waxed brown paper have been placed every few feet apart. On them the harvested grapes will be laid to dry. There is some shade under the vines near the stalks but the workers must be careful when working or resting there because spiders and wasps aplenty have nested there. Jesusita, Sergio, and Yolanda are picking grapes while Paulina is tending to Concepcion by dragging her around the ranch in a lug box, trying to keep her out of the sun, as her mother instructed, by moving her from under one row of vines to another as the sun shifts. Now Paulina has been stung by a wasp and is writhing and crying on the burning sand. Jesusita looks in every direction for help but there is no one in sight. She sends Sergio and Yolanda back to where they were picking before the contratista finds the five of them huddled together, not working, and fires them. He had been reluctant to hire them,

to let them on the truck yesterday morning, but she had assured him, begged him, that she and the two older ones were experienced, fast pickers and that Paulina would take good care of the young one and keep her out of everyone's way. They desperately need the work. Work is becoming scarce. The season will end in one or two more weeks, and just three days ago she gave Agripina Aguirre a big part of her summer's savings as a deposit and first and last months' rent on a garage in Fresno where they will live through the winter.

She tries to quiet Paulina, but the more she tries, the louder Paulina cries and the more she thrashes. She has dragged Paulina out of the blistering sun and under the shade of vines and has stationed herself so that she can see the *contratista* coming. Paulina is a sight to behold. Her clothes and hands are chalky white and her face is a dirty brown, streaked everywhere with grape juice. Her hair is matted with sweat and dirt and juice. When she keeps rubbing her right temple, Jesusita remembers hearing that a bee sting could be fatal if it pierced the brain. She tries rubbing the girl's forehead and temple but that only makes her squirm more.

Then Concepcion begins to cry. Jesusita had forgotten the youngster who is in a lug box in the middle of the row in the blazing sun, the drag rope lying useless in the sand. Concepcion is struggling to take her clothes off. "Tengo calor, Mama. Tengo calor." Every morning, the workers begin picking as soon as there is daylight. They start the day wearing three or four upper garments so that as the morning grows hot, sweat soaks the first and second layers and they become a coolant, an air conditioner, as the afternoon heat becomes fierce. "No, no! No te quites tu suéter!" She goes to the box to put Concepcion's sweater back on, but then remembers that last night as they slept huddled together under the shelter of grape trays, the child had moaned that she was cold. The nights are getting cold and last night Concepcion's undergarments were still sweat-wet, chilling her. Maybe it would be better to let Concepcion take off her sweater, let it dry off. She hears another family of pickers two rows over and becomes aware of Paulina again.

She hurries back to Paulina. This is no time to be worrying about Concepcion being cold tonight. Paulina is still moaning, rubbing her temple, and turning her head in the sand. Maybe that other family can help. Jesusita stands and looks over the vines for the other family. But even as she does, she knows that she can't ask them for help. All summer long, and this job has not been an exception, she has held herself and her family aloof from the others. She is not one of them and will never be one of them. Nor will her children be. Rogelio's death has brought her closer to them but this is as close as they will ever get to her and hers. Not for a moment will she be beholden to any of them or ever let them think that she and her children are like them.

She hears the *contratista* approach the other family, and she turns and runs, stumbling in the hot sand and leaving Paulina, hoping he won't find her. She reaches Sergio and Yolanda who have stopped working and have turned and are staring at the writhing, crying Paulina in the sand. "Hurry, he's coming! We have to work fast! Don't leave a single bunch of grapes on the vine and be careful how you set them on the trays!" A few minutes later he's there. He is a thin, wrinkled old man whose khaki fedora distinguishes him from his workers. "You and your kids do good work, señora. And you work fast. But the girl who looks after your little one has been stung by a bee. It's not serious. But you should go, take a few minutes, and comfort her. She's lying back there in the next row."

IT HAD been a long summer. When Rogelio was killed in a truck accident in March, Jesusita did not know what she would do. Sergio was fifteen, Yolanda thirteen, Paulina eleven, and Concepcion three. Two years before in the dead of the night, the family had crossed the border at Mexicali and made their way to Fresno where Rogelio had found steady work the year before. Because of Rogelio's steady job, they did not have to follow the crops in California as migrant workers six or seven months out of the year, unlike many families in the *barrio*. Thus the older three children had had the benefit of two full years in American schools. The

three spoke English and read and wrote it in varying degrees. Jesusita's options were limited—return to Mexico's abject poverty or follow the crops like other barrio families hoping for a better life.

In late April, she joined the caravans of families headed for Coahuila Valley and the spring fruits and vegetables. Then back to the Central Valley and melons, peaches, plums, figs, and apricots. Next, over to the Coast for lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and strawberries, returning to the Central Valley for the grape harvest and the final six weeks of the season.

The living conditions were grim. They ate under makeshift shelters of fruit boxes or fruit trays or under trees or even vines. Water had to be hauled in using whatever containers were available, sometimes far from the ranch house or from an irrigation ditch. Handcrafted pits were their stoves to cook whatever non-perishable foods they were able to carry with them or to warm what canned goods they could buy from rural stores. Their toilets were always but a few feet from their shelters wherever there was the least chance they could be seen by others. Their human waste was covered over by dirt as best they could. Leaves were used to clean themselves. They slept on the ground either over or under the few blankets they carried.

From the beginning Jesusita decided to winter in Fresno. She had lived there for two years and knew the resources that would be available to her there and the schools that her children could be enrolled in five or six months each year.

AT THE end of the season Jesusita and her children make their way to Agripina Aguirre's house on the outskirts of Fresno. In her big backyard stands a twelve-by-twenty-five-foot garage. Its sides and roof are made of sheets of rusting, corrugated tin nailed to an assortment of wood framing. The floor is dirt. It has a small, wood-burning stove, but there is no water, no electricity, no window. It has but a single door. After more than six months of makeshift shelters at ranch after ranch, the garage seems like a bit of heaven to Jesusita. An outhouse is at the far corner of the lot. That

too is a huge improvement over the holes they had to dig, usually by hand, to bury their waste at the ranches. With the door shut, the garage is dark but during the day there are enough holes and slits in the corrugated tin to be able to see. For night she will have to buy a kerosene lamp. Water can be had at a hand pump near the house.

Once they have brought their few belongings and moved in, Jesusita sets about to make the garage more homelike. She, Sergio, and Yolanda scour the alleys behind downtown stores for discarded cardboard boxes and behind grocery stores for wood crates. Box by box, crate by crate, they carry and drag them, trip by trip, to Agripina's garage. There they break down the cardboard boxes and lay them over the garage dirt to make a smooth, clean floor. The crates will be their tables and chairs. She pays pennies to grocers for their discarded flour and burlap sacks. These they take to the Salvation Army and stuff them with clothes and rags from a salvage bin; these are their mattresses. But the nights have turned cold and the first night on the new mattresses is especially cold. Lying there in her clothes, kept awake by the cold, it occurs to Jesusita that they could fill more sacks and use them as quilts. The next day they return to the grocers and then to the Salvation Army.

Except for occasional dunkings in ditches and creeks, the family hasn't bathed in months. Jesusita buys the biggest tin tub she can find. At the end of the first week, heating water on the woodstove, the family bathes in shifts with those not bathing sitting at the far end of the garage with their backs to the bathers.

Aside from the weekly bathing, the woodstove is lit only once a day for as long as it takes to cook dinner. As the nights grow colder, Concepcion huddles closer and closer to the stove after dinner. One especially cold night, Concepcion is able to rest her hands against the stove's iron sides less than an hour after dinner. "Lumbre, Mama. Lumbre, más lumbre!" Concepcion shouts.

"Cállese!" answers Jesusita, as she sits on her mattress mending by the kerosene light. The little one continues, "Lumbre, Mama. Lumbre, más lumbre!"

“Cállese!” Jesusita repeats several times. Concepcion doesn’t shut up. Jesusita explodes, throwing her mending aside and springing to her feet. In three or four quick steps, she yanks the little one from the stove, screaming, “There is no money! We have no money!” The little one begins to cry. Jesusita becomes outraged, swatting her hard wherever her hand finds her. “We have no money!” she keeps screaming. The child howls as she is dragged across the cardboard floor and thrown onto the girls’ mattress and then has a quilt hurled over her, muffling her howling.

There is an uneasy silence among the other three who are sitting around the kerosene lamp with open texts they have just received, struggling to make some sense of the chapters they have missed. They pretend not to see or hear. Their eyes are glued to their books. When Mama gets like this, they never know what to do. She is constantly telling Sergio that at fifteen, he is the man of the house. But when she gets like this, he feels like a frightened, helpless little boy. There’s nothing to do except pretend that it isn’t happening and hope that her fury won’t be turned on him. Yolanda defends Mama whenever she and Sergio talk. She reminds him time and time again that Mama had never been like this before Papa died. But for Mama, where would the four of them be? Mama has worked incredibly hard for them, and it is only right that she should expect much of them too. As a result, whenever Yolanda falls in the path of Mama’s wrath, she feels doubly wronged. Paulina is deathly afraid of Mama when she gets like this. She, more than any of the others, seems to raise Mama’s ire, no matter what she does.

Two nights after Concepcion was yanked from the stove, Paulina, shivering, says to no one in particular, “Oh, it’s so cold in here.”

Jesusita leaps up off the cardboard and, before Paulina knows what is happening, slaps her across the face, knocking her down and taunting her with, “Cold! You say you’re cold! Cold are you!” shaking the girl hard. “You’re cold, are you? Are you cold?” determined to get an answer out of her. The crying child is too terrified to answer.

“Are you cold? Look at me! Answer me! Tell me you’re cold! I said look at me!”

The girl can’t look at her. It is not the screaming or the shaking but the eyes that are terrorizing her: huge, rage-filled, hate-filled eyes that threaten worse things. The others see those eyes. There is no pretending now. They all know those eyes. “It’s like she wants to kill you, tear you to pieces,” Sergio has said. “She’s crazy when she gets like that.”

Jesusita doesn’t stop, and Yolanda finally pleads, “Mama, don...” Only to have Mama turn on her with that look, silencing her. Turning back to Paulina, “You’re cold, are you! I’m going to show you what cold is! You’re going outside!”

“Mama, it’s cold and dark out there,” Yolanda pleads. Once again a look quiets her.

Jesusita opens the garage door, pushes Paulina outside, and slams the door shut. She stays at the door, tense, straining to hear the girl, guarding against the girl becoming so loud that Agripina or some other neighbor might hear her. Paulina’s crying; her pleas are growing louder. “Mama, please let me in. I’m freezing. I’m scared. Please, Mama, open the door.”

Jesusita flings the door open and hisses, “If you don’t shut up and stop your crying, you’re going to get a beating you’ll never forget!” The girl believes her, and the pleas become stifled sobbings. Thirty-five minutes later, Jesusita opens the door. “Get in here and get to bed!”

She orders everyone to bed. She turns off the lamp and lies down on her mattress fully clothed. She can’t sleep. She’s tense, and every few seconds her body jerks. As much as she tries, she can’t stop the jerking. She can’t think. She can only feel, and after a while the feeling is clear: she is struggling against the sense that she has done something wrong. But she has done nothing wrong. She wishes she could cry. But she vowed to stop crying months ago at one of the ranches. She had cried so much alone at night that one night she felt that she couldn’t cry anymore. It was more than being tear-drained; it was the conviction that tears were useless,

that tears weakened her and made matters worse. Life is what it is, she tells herself constantly. In order for her and her children to survive, she has to be strong. Her children have to be strong or they will never survive. They have to learn now that life is hard; they have to learn now to be brave and withstand the brutal hardships of life. She has done nothing wrong. They have no money. They are down to their last pennies. For more than a week they have eaten boiled beans or boiled lentils. She has rationed the tortillas to one a day for each. And now the lentils are gone and they have enough beans for maybe three days. The firewood costs money and it is almost gone. She has done nothing wrong.

Early the next morning, she puts the beans to soak. The longer they soak, the less firewood they will need. She counts the last five tortillas. Tomorrow there will be beans, just beans. And the day after? She's not sure, she doesn't know. She has been down to the Power building so many times looking for work that Mr. Jim has taken to locking the back door so that she can't go in and ask him again. The last time he yelled at her, "How many times do I have to tell you? There's no work! I have my crew! Just because you cleaned here last year for a few weeks doesn't mean that you have a job here every year!" She has tried other office buildings, even waiting outside in the dark hoping that someone won't come to work and they will need her. No one has needed her.

She has taken to sending Sergio out after school to every house in the neighborhood and beyond asking if they need yard work. After a week of "no's," she doesn't believe him and begins following him, hiding behind trees and bushes and fences to watch as he knocks on each door. His luck is no better than hers.

Darkness now comes just after five and brings with it a cold that slices through the corrugated tin as if it wasn't there, at times making the inside of the garage seem colder than outside. This night is one of those nights. Concepcion has laid down on the girls' mattress, covering herself with her quilt. Yolanda and Paulina are sitting on the mattress too, quilt-covered, doing their homework. Sergio, with jacket and cap on and hands in his pockets, alter-

nately sits and rises and paces back and forth, sits and rises, waiting for the appointed hour when he can light the fire. Jesusita sits next to the kerosene lamp mending. She knows they are cold, but no one has dared mention the cold. She has foregone her quilt to show them, even though she too is cold. Her thumb and forefinger pressed against a needle are numb. But she has ordered that the fire can only be lit at 6:30, making best use of the firewood to cook and heat. Tonight is the coldest night yet, and for a moment she thinks of starting the fire early, but only for a moment, because in two or three days they will be out of firewood. She continues sewing, apparently self-absorbed, as if she is completely unaware of the cold. Until every part of her body feels caked in cold, so cold that she can no longer guide the needle. She stops sewing. She sits, waiting. At 6:23 she can wait no longer. "Sergio, start the fire."

There is excitement in the garage. The little one yelps. Yolanda and Paulina rush to help Sergio with the fire, rumpling up paper and handing him kindling. The paper glows yellow-orange. The kindling lights. Then Sergio crosses three half-logs on the kindling. But instead of flames, there is smoke. Sergio blows into the stove. More smoke, lots of smoke. The girls peer into the stove's door. Thick smoke. They blow. Smoke begins pouring out of the stove. Sergio closes the stove door. He waits a few minutes. He tries again. He has to be careful with the kindling: there's not much left. More smoke. He closes the stove door and kneels with his head down. Everyone, even Jesusita, is watching. He tries a third time. Same result. He pulls out one of the blackened half-logs. He examines it and says, "Mama, it's green. It won't burn."

When Jesusita sees the smoke the third time, she knows. Sergio need not have spoken. Everyone turns and looks at her. She doesn't see them. Her look cautions them. They dare not speak. But it is not what they think. She is thinking of Agripina, the fat woman who lives in the front house, her landlady. She will have to crawl to her now, beg from her. There is no other way.